



**THE STATE OF
THE YOUTH:
SIERRA LEONE 2018**

**RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The report was written by Lois Aspinall with support from Willie Gus Williams, Lucy Sannoh, Abdulrahman Diallo Kamara and Natalie Agboeze.

Restless Development is the global agency for youth-led development. We support young people to demand and deliver a just and sustainable world. We work to make sure young people have a voice, a living, have access to sexual rights, and are leaders in preventing and solving the world's challenges.

We work out of strategic hubs in ten countries across Africa, Asia and in the UK and USA, with a wider network of partners across the world. We listen to young people; our work is led by young people; and together we help young people make lasting change in their communities and countries.

Restless Development has been working in Sierra Leone since 2005. We have recruited, trained, supported and maintained a network of over 9,000 young Sierra Leoneans. Restless Development alumni come from rural and urban communities from every district in the country – their work has reached hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans in this time. They trained as social mobilisers and peer educators, not only leading community development but gaining skills and expertise to enable them to lead healthy and productive lives and careers.

Restless Development is politically neutral. All views expressed in the report are from young people in Sierra Leone.

Thanks is given to UNICEF, without whom this report would not have been possible.

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FOREWORD BY FRANCIS KAIKUMBA

Like many others, I am tired of hearing young people in Sierra Leone talked about in phrases steeped in negativity. Too often we see young people through the lens of the risks they pose to the country. If they're not being portrayed as the problem, they are pitied. People look at the indicators – teenage maternal mortality, or unemployment - and imagine a bleak existence for young people here.

Yes life can be hard, but are young people here a threat? Do Sierra Leoneans consider their lives to be bleak?

In this report young people answer those questions. More than anything, this report showcases the exceptional resilience that Restless Development and our partners have long recognised in young people in this country. I am excited about this report because it shows our youth as an engaged, positive force with a passion to help their communities and an immense pride in Sierra Leone's democracy.

This report is not sentimental – it does not shy away from the challenges young people are working through but it ultimately presents a picture of hope.

Young people will be decisive in crowning the victor in the 2018 election. Whichever presidential candidate gets the keys to State Lodge, they will do so because they managed to secure the votes of young

people in good number. This report should serve as a guide to the new President to show him what young people expect in 2018 and beyond, including:

- A radical improvement in the quality of education. For many that includes free provision, for all it means high quality teaching and a classroom safe from corruption and sexual assault.
- On the economy, young people want to see Sierra Leone stand on her own two feet. Young people want to support their own families through good quality, secure jobs in positions that give them a chance to lead.
- Young people also want to see the land that they love producing food and for it to be processed here.
- On health, most young people simply ask for what they have been promised – free services for mothers and babies, free support to Ebola victims and decent affordable care for everyone else.

But what this research reveals more than anything is the passionate commitment to democracy of many of Sierra Leone's young people. Right now many young people are critically considering candidates with an acute sense of duty to the nation. There is some evidence of a rejection of the transactional violence that characterised previous elections and the vast majority of young people see post-election violence as something from the past.

Of course what happens in Spring 2018 remains to be seen. Yet there is reason to be optimistic.

We are living in a time of 'peak youth'. For the next ten years we have one shot to ensure that young people are driving development and positive change in society. Restless Development in Sierra Leone will continue to listen to and ensure that our programmes are youth-led. We will continue to work shoulder to shoulder with colleagues at the Ministry of Youth Affairs

and the government of Sierra Leone. We will continue to find ways to support young people to address the needs of this nation

Restless Development want to thank our partners at UNICEF for supporting this work and in particular for allowing us to use their U-Report social mobilisation tool. Restless Development greatly value the partnership with UNICEF and recognise the enormous contribution they make to improving the lives of young people in Sierra Leone.

Francis Kaikumba,
Country Director - Restless
Development Sierra Leone

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BACKGROUND

The votes of Sierra Leone’s young people will be decisive in determining who wins the election in March 2018. Under 35s comprise 58% of the voting age population, a higher proportion than at any time in Sierra Leone’s history.

Despite this, young people are more likely to be seen as troublemakers in 2018, rather than kingmakers. In the run up to the vote there is a persistent worry about what young people might be capable of. Fear of disenfranchised young people is rife and the SLPP manifesto talks about the *youthquake* of “unskilled, underemployed and unemployed youth roaming the streets”¹.

In a setting where young Sierra Leoneans are more likely to be depicted as a problem to be solved than candidates for office, this report gives voice to young people. It presents findings from a youth-led study which set out to hear from young people themselves. The report outlines what young people will be voting for in 2018: their hopes and expectations for the future of the country. It covers young people’s perceptions of the threat of violence during this election, as well as their take on life in Sierra Leone.

YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

Youth-led research methods are in Restless Development’s DNA². Taking a mainly qualitative approach, this research was no different. Youth-led approaches empower young people to design and undertake their own research projects. As such, this study was conducted by a small team of young Sierra Leoneans trained in research methods and working for Restless Development³. Young people are therefore working to represent other young people in Sierra Leonean public life.

Eleven focus groups or triads (smaller groups of three participants) were undertaken in November 2017 across three study sites: one urban site –in Western Area Urban and two rural locations – in Bo district and Bombali district. Groups were single sex, and separated the youngest young people (15-19) from older young people (20-35) to better allow the voices and experience of all to be heard. In total, 63 young people are represented through qualitative research in this study. In combination with insights from UNICEF’s U-Report, this data aims to give a sense of what young people are feeling about the election. As this is qualitative data, it does not make any claims around representivity.

The smaller focus groups (triads) were used to amplify the voices of young people who were identified as being typically more excluded or who might face different issues growing up in Sierra Leone to the general population. Triads were conducted with people living with disabilities, teenage mothers and young Ebola survivors.

¹ Sierra Leone People’s Party 2018 Election Manifesto ‘New Direction: One Country, One People’

² To read more about Restless Development’s youth-led research methodology visit:

<http://restlessdevelopment.org/our-youth-led-research-methodology>

³ With thanks to Restless Development staff, Diallo Kamara, Lucy Sannoh and Willie Gus Williams.

Chapter 1 of this report begins with young people’s take on what makes a good life in Sierra Leone. Chapter 2 explores the barriers to achieving success. Chapters 3 and 4 look at young people’s expectations around the election, including around political violence and security. Chapter 5 investigates the issues that most affect young people to find out what young people are voting for – or against in 2018.

1. A GOOD LIFE IN SALONE

The research approached the political themes in this study from the lens of what makes a good life in Sierra Leone; do young people think it is possible to have a good life, what does success look like, and what would prevent or enable them to achieve such a thing themselves.

Education as the first route to a good life

Achievement through education was widely recognised as the most obvious way to secure a good life. This includes completing school, although obtaining a university degree was also mentioned by some.

“When my colleague is learning and brilliant in class, doing the best to pass exams and promote to the other class/level and don’t focus on sexual relationships” Female, 15-19, Bo district, rural

The cost of education, and the length of time needed to complete it leads to a sense that educated people have achieved against the odds, and that as the last ones standing, they are to be admired. The research shows that success through education is inextricably tied to the presence of a benefactor who is able to pay for fees, materials and exams. Success through education is therefore seen as both a marker of wealth and support as much as it is a predictor of future success.

“If you don’t have money, it’s not easy to be educated.” Male, 15-19, Bombali. rural

“For those who are pushing to be educated (they) will go further, but most will end up at a certain stage whilst few or one will be successful and in turn captain the family. I will admire him being that he kept his focus in ensuring that he breaks the gap and in turn helps the family.” Male, 20-35, Bo, rural

“Most of the girl child could not be educated but a few will continue, so I most admire the few.” Male, 20-35, Bo, rural

Success beyond education

Education is not the only route to success in Sierra Leone. Some young people felt that becoming skilled or developing a business was more important than being educated, and that you don’t have to go to university or complete your education to have a good life. Instead, they felt that obtaining a skilled livelihood like cloth dyeing can be a path to a secure life.

“I would admire a friend if they focus on business. It is through that business they would be able to responsibly care for young ones and family” Female, 15-19, Bo district, rural

“I always admire someone that has a big business and can help other people within the same business line” Male, 15-19, Bombali district, rural

For others, success means making the most of your talents, which might be in sport or music, although the young people were pragmatic about the chances of success through these routes, and lamented that it is hard to get spotted by the right people, such as football scouts in Sierra Leone.

“In Sierra Leone, not every young boy will want to be educated, some have talent in football, music, I am determined to be a footballer” Male, 15-19, Bombali district, rural

Family life

Beyond both education and skills, Sierra Leonean young people prioritise home life. Some young people feel that being married to a good husband who can provide for the family and who loves you, are priorities and signs of respectability – even for someone who is educated or a professional. Participants felt that having many grown up children around them in old age is a sign of a life well-lived. Indeed more than signifying success, a large family will provide for you in old age.

While family is important, for young Sierra Leoneans, it is important that starting a family shouldn't happen too soon as becoming pregnant means that it is much harder – for young women – to achieve their potential. It was felt that if a young woman or girl could stay in school, she is better able to delay the onset of sexual relationships, marriage and pregnancy, but if she drops out of school there would be more pressure to do these things. This was a key concern for the youngest women in the groups (15-19).

“When [she] was growing up she was never involved in love affairs that why she was able to reach to her aims in life” Teenage mother Bombali district, rural

One of the young women in the study felt that getting married in your 20s was best as it demonstrated stability.

“Once a lady gets married it shows responsibility, because you try to develop a home, and not just moving here and there.” Female, 20-35, Western Area Urban

While young women were more likely to talk about their aspirations and concerns around family life, some men also see children – in particular being able to provide for their children – as a core aspiration and a marker of success.

“If you are not into anything [don't have a job], you will not even be able to feed your kids and that will make then not to respect you or even reject/not recognise you as their father” Teenage mother, Western Area, Urban

Conduct and relations with others

How you present yourself in private and in public was important to young people in Sierra Leone. Across many of the groups there was a strong sense that participants take pride in their conduct and make effort to act as a proud Sierra Leonean should: that is, they try to be serious, hardworking and dutiful and in particular obedient and respectful to one's parents [see Box 1]. It also means avoiding drugs, including smoking and living a 'prayerful' life – be it in Christian or a Muslim faith. 'Good conduct', unlike many of the other things people aspire to, is seen as something that young people have almost complete control over.

“Another person cannot stop you from living a good life. Because there are many ways one could live a good life, like been obedient to elders, being respectful and prayerful.” Teenage mother Bombali district, rural

There is a very strong sense that 'idleness is a sin'. Young people repeatedly rejected the notion of 'sitting at home' and waiting for opportunities to come to them, while praising those who 'get up in the morning' and go to work. Young men in Bo particularly spoke about being proactive in finding opportunities for themselves, through 'hustling', which is something they feel they can do that older people can't.

“You also need to persevere in hard work. Do not just sit at home with the notion that “someday I will make it in life” You have to search for things to do that will bring income in” Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

“If you are not in work you don’t need to sit at home and fold your hand, you should go out and find a job.” Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

BOX 1: ‘DUTIFULL’ SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Deference and respect towards parents and elders was a recurrent theme throughout the study. While clearly this is a positive feature in many families, it can be a dynamic that poses significant risk to young people.

Restless Development is of the view that this dynamic may need to be unpacked – speaking back to one’s parents can be deeply dangerous in this country. Reports made directly to Restless Development staff suggest that streets and police cells in this country contain children who have fallen foul of their parents’ or other older relatives’ discipline: police will readily throw children into jail cells for days or even weeks at the behest of unhappy parents following family disputes.

It is Restless Development Sierra Leone’s view that deference and respect are all well and good but we need to be aware when this becomes a euphemism for powerlessness and an acute lack of rights that exposes children and young people to harm in this country.

The way that young people interact with their wider family and their neighbours is also key to living well. Living a life free from family arguments, or quarrels with neighbours was widely mentioned in the study. People notice and admire families who get on well and live amicably alongside their neighbours. A few – generally younger men – went further with this idea, saying that a good life means living free from war and violence. However, this was not widely mentioned by participants.

Your life in the community

Young people in Sierra Leone are highly community-oriented. Success here means being able to provide for yourself, but critically, many felt that a ‘good life’ would mean being able to support their immediate families and wider relatives as well as other young people in their community.

Supporting others might mean materially providing for them, or it may mean creating opportunities for other young people.

“I do admire a person who engage and do business that can help other people to develop” Teenage Mother, Bombali district, rural

Linked to the idea of neighbourliness are strong norms against selfishness and a powerful compulsion to contribute to the community if you are able to. If you achieve personally, you must give back to the community. This is true of people living locally as well as diaspora.

“[if you] travel to the diaspora [you] still have the community in mind; fund road construction, make pipe burn water available in the community and also encourage people to partake in social activities... it brings development to the community and society as a whole.” Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

“Opportunities come for 3 or 5 person but because of selfishness or greed one person gets it alone”

Male, 15-19, Bombali district, rural

The pursuit of a career

In addition to the hallmarks of success mentioned above, young people often articulate their own goals and aspirations in terms of the careers they would like to pursue. Finance-based careers, including accountancy and working in a bank were widely aspired to. Others mentioned careers that would help people in their community. This included becoming a nurse, establishing an orphanage, becoming a philanthropist and setting up community assets like a TV hub or a youth centre.

Fatalism

While most young people had aspirations for themselves, either professional or personal, a minority expressed a sense of fatalism, and a lack of any personal aspiration. This view was expressed by a young Ebola survivor.

“Our destinies are determined by God, there are differences between people’s destinies. We cannot determine the outcome of destinies; so that is it.” **Young Ebola Survivor**

For others in the study, having their basic needs met was what they expect of a good life. For some, this was as simple as having shelter; others mentioned access to food or steady electricity.

2. BARRIERS TO A GOOD LIFE IN SALONE

While young people broadly believe that it is possible to live well in Sierra Leone and were able to point to people in their own communities who do so, they all knew well the barriers that need to be overcome.

Poverty and ill health

Poverty and what young Sierra Leoneans call 'lack of finance' is the critical barrier to success. This was acute for young people who did not have benefactors or people around them to pay for education, or to help them make a start in business.

"Young people are currently struggling to be able to live a comfortable life in this country because the country is hard and poor" Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

Young Sierra Leoneans talked about the grinding poverty that they experience. They said that after a while it makes them lose hope, makes them lose confidence and makes them more vulnerable to the temptations of crime.

"If you don't have money, you try to abandon school, and you quit and get any job, including stealing" Male 15-19, Bombali district, rural

The loss of a benefactor and/or parent through sickness was something many young people had experienced. This was something that had particularly affected the young Ebola survivors who had lost their parents to the disease. Poverty and ill health exacerbate each other. The ill-health of family members is a strain on time, finances and the mental wellbeing of young people. And while 'sickness' was generally not specified, sickle-cell anaemia was mentioned, as was Ebola, in addition to general ill health.

"I don't have chance to proceed and complete my secondary schooling because my sponsors are all dead, I have lost my father, I have lost my mother; even my elder brother who was the head of us. It is now 2 years since I stopped to attend school" Young Ebola survivors, Western Area, Urban

Poverty is exacerbated by the high cost of living in Sierra Leone. The increased cost of food was most often identified as a barrier to a good and affordable life. Indeed some young people pointed to the discrepancy in the cost of food compared to drugs as part of the reason why some young people use what little they have to buy intoxicating substances.

"A sachet of alcohol is Le: 500, while a plate of food is Le: 3,000. So young people prefer to have the drug than buy food. That is not a good life" Male 15-19, Western Area, Urban

Lack of role models

Some people felt that a lack of suitable role models, especially outside of Western Freetown, was something which contributes to low or unfulfilled ambitions. This includes the influence of negative role models, such as those engaged in drugs, but also encompasses the absence of positive influencers due to

a lack of parental guidance. Some recognised this as another function of poverty such that parents don't have time or money to support their children.

“Encouragement and love, when you don't have from your homes it is a barrier” Male 15-19, Bombali district, rural

Insecure employment, lack of jobs and exclusion from decision making

Insecurity in work was something that concerns young Sierra Leoneans. There is a sense that even if you have a good job, you may find yourself unemployed at short notice. Others worried that there are not enough jobs, including for people who have managed to complete university. Some explicitly linked underemployment of young people to exclusion from public office and ultimately the failure to promote or foster the talent that could lift Sierra Leone out of poverty. There was a view from the young urban male group that failure to empower young people in good jobs leads to young people never learning the leadership skills to become self-reliant.

“If you are in your work place and there is an emergency, you can be sacked at short notice.” Male 15-19, Bombali district, rural

“Young people have to end up engaging in cheap labour; like washing cars or serve as nannies in order to take care of themselves and their children. That is not the kind of work they should be engaged in right now as the future leaders. How would they provide better leadership tomorrow?” Male 15-19, Western Area, Urban

A small number of young people talked about feeling excluded from decision making in their community. They feel that when decisions are taken by older people, younger people are held back.

“Young people are left of certain decision making process by stakeholders... The needs of younger people are always left out because they are not often engaged” Male 15-19, Western Area, Urban

Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services or rights

The youngest women in the study talked about the challenges they face around their sexual health. It is clear that young female Sierra Leoneans face threats of sexual violence and intimidation that others are not exposed to. Young women recount unwanted sexual advances and assault, both in urban areas and as they walk to access water in rural areas. Young women also report being vulnerable to coercive sex and exploitation at the hands of caregivers. The youngest women feel more vulnerable to transactional sex, which they see as the latest 'trick' used against them, as their poverty and gender make them more vulnerable.

“Like you are walking in the street and met a young man who proposed love to you, and you rejected his proposal. He would force you to do what you don't want to do; and some people easily give up, the outcome is always teenage pregnancy, which would stop you from achieving your goal.” Teenage mother, Western Area Urban

“You would have to offer sex to some men before he they can help you; that is now a popular trick of men now. Nothing goes for nothing; give what you have to gain what you want... In the worst case

scenario, you will avoid the perpetrator, especially to guard your pride as a lady” Teenage mother, Western Area Urban

Other women talked about consensual transactional sex. Some reflect that a lack of education and skills lead women to sell sex. One teenage mother talked about sex work being the result of a lack of skills which leaves them powerless.

“They were out on the street because they don’t have any skills. They cannot make any decision on their own. If you don’t learn a skill, you end up selling sex for money” Teenage mother, Western Area Urban

Early marriage / pregnancy

Some of the young women in the study who had children when they were still teenagers talked about how the twin blights of early marriage and lack of access to contraception had affected their lives. They talked of ‘successive’ pregnancies that never allowed them time to do anything for themselves, preventing them from achieving what they are capable of.

“I can be very determined to pursue my education, but my parents are very poor. A husband would show up to marry me, my people would force me to marry you. And this is happening in my community.” Teenage mother, Western Area Urban

“The young people usually face challenges in my community especially girls by getting into early marriage and teenage pregnancy some can even die in the process” Teenage mother Bombali district, rural

Disasters exacerbate other challenges

Naturally, these barriers often interact. The account below from one of the teenage mothers explains how despite resisting, she came to be initiated in a secret society following flooding. It is an account of how poverty, secret societies, lack of parental support, and disaster interacted - in her words - “to put her life at risk” forcing her to leave home disrupting and ultimately ending her education.

“Our parents sometimes force us to practice our traditions that are neither in the bible nor in the Koran, like join secret societies. Those things may discourage young people. It happened to me, I was residing with my mother, who was very adamant that I should either be initiated (undergo female genital mutilation/cutting) in the Bondo society or leave the home. I was scared because of the stories we were told by our friends who had gone through the secret society; so I decided to leave the home and went to reside with my Aunty. But there was the flooding that forced me to move over to a friend; all those things can put our lives at risk”. Teenage mother, Western Area Urban

Initiation into these societies is tied to the onset of early marriage, early sex and childbirth at a young age. The young woman in the study dropped out of education during this period despite her determination to become educated.

Disabled people face greater exclusion and mistrust

Young people living with disabilities face bigger barriers to success in Sierra Leone. Young people talked about the physical challenges that prevent them from participating in life fully – such as schools that are not sufficiently accessible to people with physical disabilities and visual impairments. However, the biggest barriers that people living with disabilities spoke of were around cultural acceptance and stigma. Young people with disabilities feel they are perceived as weak, ‘stupid’, or criminal. This excludes them from fully engaging in politics or in public life as people with valid opinions and whose leadership potential are respected.

“Firstly, the leaning institutions and all others are not disable-friendly they should try to make it friendly” Young person living with a disability, Bo district, rural

“Some people in society don’t have trust in us they usually said we are criminal and stubborn people” Young person living with a disability, Bombali district, rural

“You will have no say in community matters as whatever you say will be looked at as stupid/useless in the community” Young person living with a disability, Bo district, rural

Ebola has derailed the ambitions of some of the young people in the study, especially around their education. Survivors in the research continue to face physical challenges, including headaches, and few had received any routine support with medical costs or education. However some expressed a renewed perspective, saying they are happy to be alive, and few felt they are exposed to any lingering stigma around Ebola.

“In fact, people thought when you caught the virus, you would not have a good life. For the fact that I caught the virus and became well, I am definitely convinced that I will.” Young Ebola survivors, Western Area, Urban

“Ebola is come and gone, besides I don’t carry the virus in me any longer” Young Ebola survivors, Western Area, Urban

While Ebola survivors in the study do not feel they face particular stigma as survivors of the disease, it is possible –indeed likely – that those who go on to become visibly disabled, for instance through blindness, may face the stigma that the people with visible disabilities face in Sierra Leone. Survivors of Ebola are at risk

Jealousy & witchcraft

Many young people identify the forces of jealousy and witchcraft as stumbling blocks in their lives. Witchcraft can hamper plans and ambitions, seemingly out of the blue. Participants explained that if others observe you doing well or succeeding, they may curse you out of jealousy causing you to lose a job, a university place or even the breakdown of a marriage. This can have the effect of making young people more guarded and secretive about their aspirations and successes.

Figure 1: Witchcraft is seen to derail the pursuit of young people's ambitions



“Some people may try to spoil the good things that come your way... Sometimes we call it incantation practise.” Teenage mother Bombali district, rural

“I have written application letters, but still I have not got a job. So I don't really know if there are demonic manipulations in the community” Female 20-35, Western Area Urban

The heavy cost of failure

Despite the evident challenges young people face, many blame themselves for failures. They felt that if only individuals work hard and ‘stay focussed’, (often meaning avoiding the temptations of alcohol, smoking and sex), then it is possible to achieve their goals. Failure to achieve one’s goals is initially attributed to a failure of character or lack of seriousness.

This internal criticism is also projected outwards. Young people themselves have an impression of their peers as less disciplined, more impulsive and therefore more inclined to crime than other Sierra Leoneans.

“Another challenges we young people face is stealing because the moment they want something they will go out and get it” Young person living with a disability, Bombali district, rural

“Some young people like to rush life they will not wait for their time they want to get what they immediately need and it sometimes make them to involve in theft” Teenage mother Bombali district, rural

The young Sierra Leoneans in the study talked movingly of the mental cost of failure. If they are not able to achieve their goals, for instance complete their studies, or establish themselves through a business, they spoke of the mental and emotional price. For instance, they felt a sense of becoming ‘tired with life’ and even frustrated to the point of considering suicide.

3. THE 2018 ELECTION

Most young Sierra Leoneans are enthusiastic democrats. In speaking of the upcoming elections, they use the language of ‘rights’ and ‘citizens’, they value and prize democracy and in discussion some even make reference to the constitution. Many saw elections as an essential part of what it is to be a country, and indeed what it is to be a citizen of Sierra Leone.

“It important to us because for most of us this is the one thing to show that I am a citizen of this country”
Female, 20-35, Bombali, rural

“Every country need elections” Young person living with a disability, Bo district, rural

Elections and violence

However, when Sierra Leonean young people talk about elections, they do talk about violence. Encouragingly, most tended towards optimism, saying that they think 2018 will not be overly violent. Indeed, some talk about elections as the counterpoint to violence; only in holding elections can Sierra Leone see peaceful change, while a minority expressed fears that the election would bring violent disruption, even war. For a full discussion of young people’s attitudes and expectations around election violence and the transition, see Chapter 4: Peace and Security.

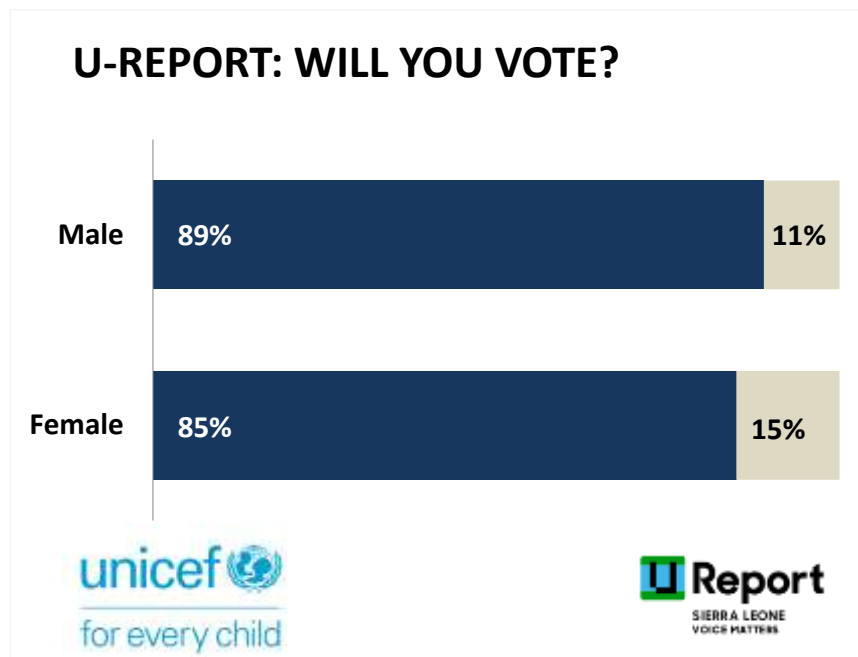
“Because this the only way we can have change peacefully as we are not interested in changing leaders by forceful means or fighting. We believe in democracy.” Young person living with a disability, Bo district, rural

“This election will bring war, just like the previous election it will bring war” Male, 15-19, Bombali, rural

One participant expressed a suspicion that they would see ‘irregularities’ in the outcome. Although this was not a widely held fear, there was the suspicion that it could be a trigger point for unrest as people will not tolerate foul play in the administration of the election.

Voter registration

Most of the young Sierra Leoneans in the study have registered to vote, indeed there was a sense among research participants that this was typical of the young people they know. There was a feeling of pride around the fact that young people will participate in good number in the election.



UNICEF’s U-Report SMS Poll: Aug 88th 2017, 11,018 responded out of 74,858 polled

This is backed up by NEC registration data that suggests some 1.8 million young people have registered⁴ as well as UNICEF's August 2017 poll of U-Reporters⁵. That poll saw 89% of male respondents and 85% of female respondents saying that they intended to vote.

"[Young people are] currently the highest registered voters for 2018 election and they are more active into electioneering process than the old" Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

However, there was at least one participant who was motivated to register for the ID card alone and who had no interest in voting. Others talked about people they knew who had not registered. Dissatisfaction with the two parties on offer was the reason given for people choosing not to register, as well as the registration process itself, which in the end defeated some as a result of long waiting times.

"Because of the two political parties; if there were neutral candidates or political parties, people would have registered" Teenage mothers, Western Area Urban

"[My friend] attempted twice but could not take the pressure of standing in a long queue to be registered" Female, 20-35, Western Area Urban

Excitement and a sense of responsibility

Many of the young people in the groups are voting for the first time. For most of these people there was a keen sense of excitement about exercising their democratic rights as first time voters. Young voters express a sense of responsibility around the election, and many of them are clearly approaching the task with care. Some talked about taking time to decide who to vote for, avoiding the influence of other people, and being cautious of false promises made by 'fake' politicians.

"We need to take our time as young people to vote wisely without being influenced by others" Male, 15-19, Bombali, rural

"I feel this election will be peaceful if we the young people are not misled by these fake politicians" Male, 15-19, Bombali, rural

For some young people, there was an overt rejection of the vote-buying they see their elders undertaking.

"I often tell [one of the elders] that he is only supporting the president because he gives him money" Ebola survivor, Western Area Urban

Many of the young people talked about their hopes for change, and in particular their hopes that a new president would bring improvements to Sierra Leone in terms of education. Young people are clearly engaging in vigorous debate both with their family, friends and in the wider community. Many felt that their voices were being heard in their communities and they were making a positive contribution, either as individuals, or as members of political parties.

"I do start discussion so I can learn from people views too" Female, 15-19, Bombali, rural

⁴ NEC/UNDP Voter Registration data supplied to Restless Development upon request (December 2017)

⁵ U-Report is UNICEF's SMS based social mobilisation tool. As of January 2018 it has more than 95,000 members across Sierra Leone. Data presented here is based on U-Reporters who responded to SMS polls sent out to them. More information is available at: <https://sierraleone.ureport.in/polls/>

“I believe it is my right to discuss with people because we are living in a democratic state” Female, 15-19, Bombali, rural

However, political debate was not for everyone; others are simply tired of hearing about the election.

“As soon as young have some food in the morning, they would start to engage in an unnecessary argument till the evening” Ebola survivors, Western, Western Area Urban

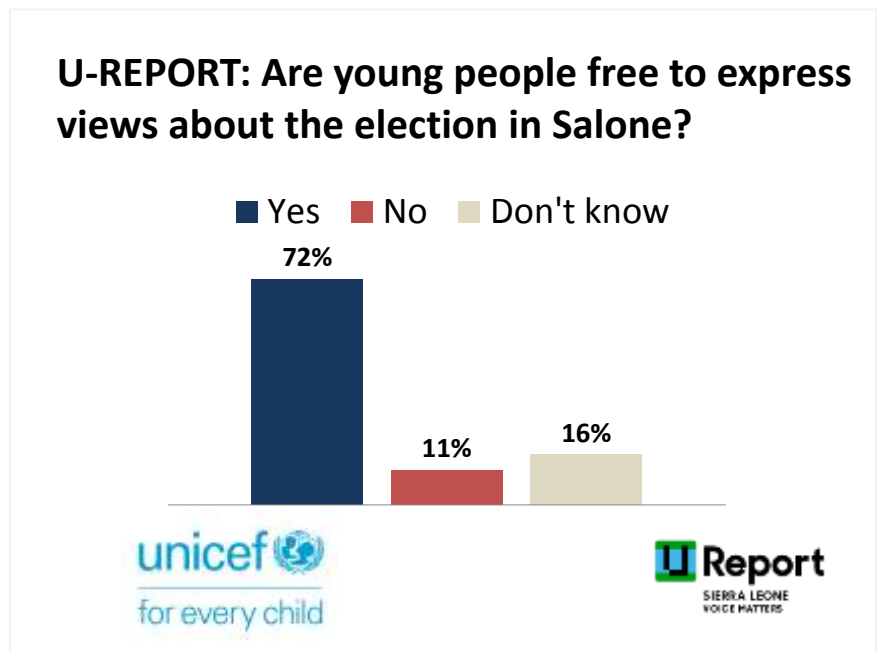
UNICEF’s U-Report tool suggests that freedom of expression is something that the country’s young U-Reporters largely feel that they have access to. Seven in ten (72%) of the U-Reporters who responded to the poll felt that young people are able to express their views. In conversation, several people made reference to the constitution of Sierra Leone which defends free speech – and relayed occasions where they challenge the views of other people.

“The constitution mandates them to give out their views constructively” Female, 20-35, Bombali, rural

“Everybody is free to express their views on the election but you should not use unfriendly words or abusive language ... I say so because it our right to express our view as we have freedom of speech in our constitution.” Male, Bo district, 20-35, rural

While most people appear to have freedom of expression – some young people thought this didn’t equate to political influence. The view, perhaps more strongly felt in Freetown, is that both the SLPP and the APC had side-lined young people in the early stages of the election. One participant felt that young people had even left these parties, in favour of new parties, as a result.

“Young people are free to express themselves in the electioneering process.... The only major challenge is, I am not confident whether young people have the voice to collectively request from political parties what they want... the collective bargaining power among young people is weak” Female, 20-35, Western Area Urban



UNICEF’s U-Report SMS Poll: Nov 28th 2017, 8,652 responders out of 65,761 polled

Young people as candidates

This perceived lack of political influence was not universal. In Freetown, there was a perception that young people are not only voters but can themselves stand for election. Unsurprisingly, young people in the study found younger candidates more approachable.

“We have a young lady that wants to be a candidate for the parliamentary election, she is a young lady. They have not given party symbols to candidates yet, but she wants to represent the APC; and she is a very young lady, she is even pregnant!” Ebola survivor, Western Area Urban

“Yes, in our community, we have 4 young people that are competing in the election; the least among them is a female, Esther, she is 25 years. Young people are approachable” Teenage mother, Western Area Urban

Fear of violence and disillusionment

However, it is also apparent that a minority of young people are approaching the election with some trepidation. For some of these young people there is a vague sense that 'elections bring war', while others point to more specific factors around this election that are making them fearful of violence.

The behaviour of party supporters in the run up to the election is the key activity that has frightened some young people. Many young people in our groups, especially among the younger women, felt intimidated to speak about politics in the run up to the March 2018 election. They fear aggression or violence from people associated with the political parties. Some talked about living in an area which is dominated by one party, where expressing support for another party would not be safe. There was the perception that risks are very real: young people spoke fearfully of violent incidents they had heard about in Freetown where young people had been attacked and even killed.

"[Q. Do you talk about the election?] What!?! The young guys also have machete... If they overheard you discussing, they would beat you mercilessly. I don't have anything to discuss!" **Teenage mothers, Western Area Urban**

"We look somehow scared because of the political tension, the reported killings of party supporters because of candidate poster" **Female 15 - 19, Bo, rural**

"The only way to keep safe from the bad boys is to keep off [politics]. In my community, I know I only have the liberty to discuss political issues when I am at home, as soon as I move out of my house to the street, I don't discuss political issues" **Female, 20-35, Western Area Urban**

Just one participant pointed to social media stoking tensions, suggesting that either it is not playing a big role in the run up to the election, or young people are not aware of the role it is playing in exacerbating tensions.

A number of young people expressed not fear, but weariness around the election. This is fuelled by a feeling that the election is unlikely to bring change, either for them in particular or for the country as a whole. Amongst this group there was a sense of dissatisfaction with politicians who make promises they won't keep. There was also the view – only mentioned by a small number of respondents – that there is nothing in the election for young people.

"For some people, they are thinking of the flagbearer for the parties, they don't have personal links to them, so they don't think there is any gain for them. So there is no need to even vote for either person." **Male 15 - 19, Bombali, rural**

"Politicians only come around during the time of the election, but they will not implement what they say when they win the election." **Male 15 - 19, Bombali, rural**

"I don't honestly know why people continue to argue around the 2018 elections, because there is nothing positive or beneficial [in it] for young people. Because they often say young people are the future, but we are not considered in the country, we don't have a voice!" **Male 15 - 19, Western Area Urban**

Expectations of a free vote

Despite some disengagement and fear amongst young people, the vast majority of the young people in the groups, even those who were scared to voice their opinions in the run-up, felt that they would be free to express their political choice at the poll. Free and open participation is entrenched in their expectations for the country, and was shared by young people in each of the research sites, including by male and female, able-bodied participants and those with a disability.

“It is my right to participate in the election day because I have reach the age to vote and it is my democratic right” Teenage mother, Bombali, rural

“Yes we are free to do so for as long as you are 18 years... Because we are all Sierra Leonean.” Young person with a disability, Bo district, rural

4. PEACE AND SECURITY

Most expect a peaceful transfer of power

Despite some fear of violence, the vast majority of the young people in the study felt that the election and the transition would pass peacefully. This is true even of people who had experienced intimidation in the run up to the election.

UNICEF's U-Report poll showed that the vast majority of U-Reporters who responded to the poll also predict that the elections will be peaceful. Eight in ten (79%) U-Reporters said that they thought the election would be peaceful in their community, as opposed to one in thirteen (8%) U-Reporters who said they thought it would not be peaceful. The remaining respondents said they didn't know. Women were

less likely to be sure that there will be peace (75%) compared to men (81%).

U-REPORT: A PEACEFUL ELECTION?

79%



In conversation, young Sierra Leoneans say that violence is in the country's past. There is a belief that the days when young people could be incited to violence with alcohol or money are behind them.

"We are going to have a peaceful election. The youth have passed the stage where in you can give them peggia (alcohol) and tell them to stab your opponent's supporter"

Male 20-35, Bo district, rural

UNICEF's U-Report SMS Poll: Nov 28th 2017, 7,772 responders out of 65,761 polled

"I don't sense anything negative around the election; we know that any candidate that they hand over power to won the election and should rule the country" Ebola survivors, Western Area Urban

Others pointed to a feeling that the Sierra Leone Government has recruited more soldiers and police as reason to be optimistic about the transfer of power, while one person mentioned the presence of international observers as something that made them feel secure.

Fear of violence and intolerance of electoral foul-play

However, as mentioned above, some young people are fearful of violence. For some this was an instinctive reaction to elections, which they see as inherently dangerous in Sierra Leone. Others are reacting to the tensions they see around them. For this group, dangerous signs included the fragmentation of politics and the emergence of smaller parties which was seen as destabilising. Others thought that the pre-election violence and intimidation was worrying. While most young people were not

concerned about the risks to themselves, people with disabilities felt that they would likely be most negatively affected as they cannot protect themselves.

“I don’t feel good about the election because a lot of things are going to occur... neither [party] wants to be in opposition; and if they don’t win the election don’t you think it will cause a war?” Teenage mother, Wester Area Urban

However, young people sometimes attributed the risk of violence to older people, as in this example shared by a young woman in Freetown who talked of young people chastising an older neighbour for talking about rebelling after the election.

“Right in my presence, an elderly person said if the SLPP wins the election, he will become a rebel; an elderly person! Some young men nearby cautioned him and said he should not be saying such things, that he is father and he should be advising his children against such things, an argument soon popped up and they ended up in a fight.” Teenage mother, Wester Area Urban

Another young Sierra Leonean talked about the intolerance of foul play in the election – especially by young people - which he felt might result in ‘problems’ if the outcome of the election is not deemed to be fair.

“In my view, if the election is rigged it will result into problem because there is high awareness among the general youth populace hence I am hoping for us to have a free and fair election” Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

Other participants had more pragmatic fears – that a run off might disturb the smooth running of schools and that the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) examinations might be cancelled or delayed. Young people are very worried about this. Failure to sit the exams would have serious impacts on young people’s future plans. Some of the young women worried that school closures would mean the onset of more mature phases of life, including sexual relationships and pregnancy.

5. THE ISSUES

So what are young people voting about? Chapter 3 showed that it is clear that many young Sierra Leoneans are voting out of a sense of democratic duty. However, when young people are asked to identify the most important issue facing them, priorities quickly emerge.

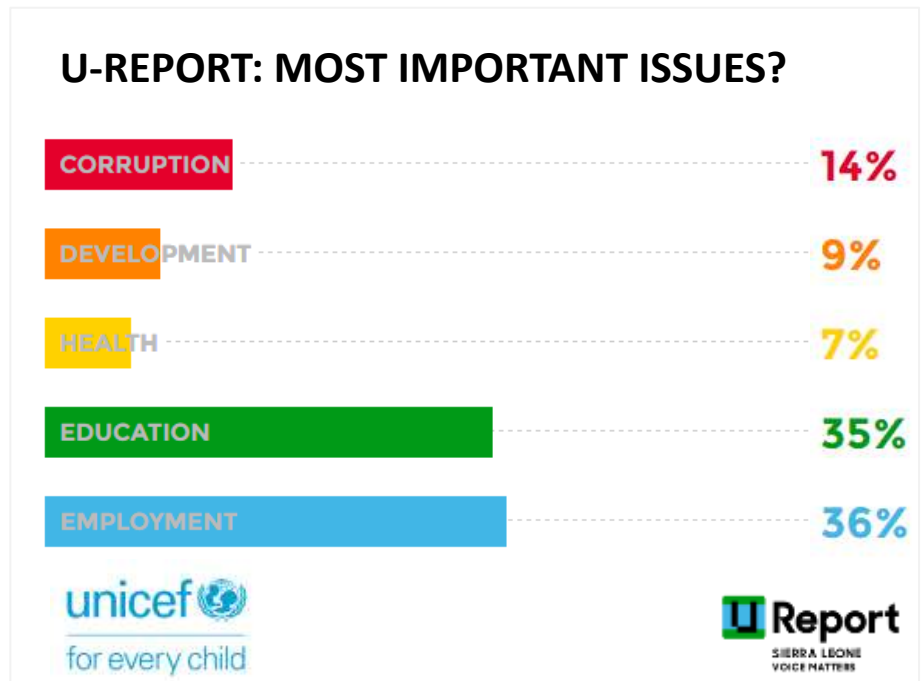
In mid-2017 a U-Report poll showed that education and employment top the list of priorities for those who responded to the poll, with 35% and 36% respectively. Corruption is seen as the third most pressing issue for U-Reporters with 14% of the vote.

Differences emerge by gender, with female U-Reporters prioritising education (46% vs 31%) and health (10% vs 6%) far more highly than men.

Meanwhile, men are more concerned about education (39% vs 24%) and corruption (16% vs 11%) compared to women.

When we look at the data by age-group we see a very clear trade-off between education and employment. The older you get, the more concerned you are about employment opportunities, at the expense of education.

U-Report data is not nationally representative, since it is based on an SMS service that respondents opt into. The priorities presented here should therefore be considered indicative of Sierra Leonean young people's priorities – likely skewed towards wealthier and better educated young people (as they can read and reply to a text written in English).



UNICEF's U-Report SMS Poll: Aug 88th 2017, 11,567 responded out of 74,858 polled

Expectations for the future

Qualitative data from interviews presents a view of young people's expectations for the future on a range of policy areas.

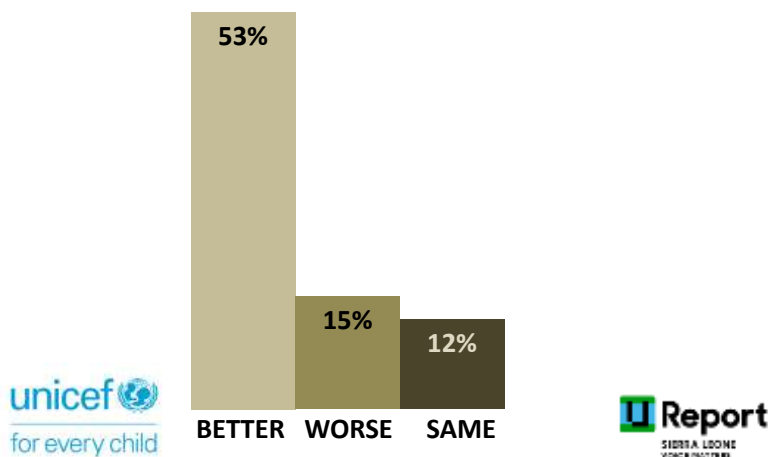
Participants were asked to say whether they thought a range of broad issues affecting Sierra Leone would get better, worse or stay the same over the next 'two to three years'. The topics discussed were informed by the priorities identified in the U-Report polls. In general, young people were deeply pessimistic about

education, health care and corruption – things which they have all experienced first-hand. They were more positive about the economy, which they felt may improve if the right leader gets elected and if people work hard.

ECONOMY

When thinking about the economy, most Sierra Leoneans included prices, inflation and employment. Hopes are resting on the outcome of the election, variously articulated as a change of government or the election of a strong leader. Hopes around the new leader are twinned with a sense that the economy will improve if Sierra Leoneans work hard and as such there was some sense that things will get better.

U-REPORT: JOB OPPORTUNITIES



U-Report data suggests that this optimism is shared amongst young U-Reporters who responded to the poll – at least in so far as job opportunities are concerned. When asked if they think job opportunities will get better, worse or stay the same, over half said they think things will get better.

The price of rice

Despite some cautious optimism around the economy, young people are worried about the affordability of everyday life. Young people feel that

UNICEF's U-Report SMS Poll: Nov 28th 2017, 7,262 responders out of 65,761 polled

prices are escalating and will never come down. The price of a 'cup of rice'

was the go-to indicator for how bad things had become. While there was some vague hope that a new leader would be able to bring prices down, the key hope was around the possibility of developing the country's agricultural potential and producing their own food.

"The most important thing in the next five years I want to see is for us to be independent by producing our own food and embarking on agriculture" Female 20-35, Bombali district, rural.

"We need to make use of our own food and show love to one another as Sierra Leoneans" Female 20-35, Bombali district, rural.

"We need good factories to make produce for us" Male, 15-19, Bombali district, rural.

The creation of skilled jobs, such as in tailoring or cloth dyeing, is also a key priority. Young people expressed a sense that the economy needs momentum – that the more work there is to do, the more work there will be in future. Others also returned to the idea that good jobs are scarce, even for people with qualifications.

"People should do a skills job like catering, tailoring, hair dressing and if people just sit without doing nothing the economy will not grow because the more they have to do, the more money flows and the more the economy will improve." Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural.

“Now even if you have a certificate and you are qualified for a job, if you don’t have strong connections, it would be very difficult for you to secure a job.” Ebola survivor, Western Area Urban

A few talked about Sierra Leone’s place in the world economy. Some referenced external factors like the value of the dollar, while another talked about opening the economy to external investments. Others pointed negatively to the influence of non-Sierra Leoneans in the economy. In particular with reference to foreign ownership of natural resources.

“We need to open up to other world partners” Female 20-35, Bombali district, rural

“We have several resources, but foreigners have come and dominated over the resources; foreigners control most of the top places, to the extent that citizens do not have right.” Female 20-35, Western Area Urban

When asked what they could personally do, answers were vague. Again young people tended to look into their own character and said that what was needed was hard work.

EDUCATION

As chapter 1 showed, a great deal of young people’s hopes and aspirations hinge on education. It is also the case that many of the young people in the study have had very poor experiences at schools, either with poor equipment, poor teaching or abuse by those in power (or indeed all three). While some expressed a hope that the new president would prioritise education, there was also widespread scepticism that improvements would be made. It is generally seen as a policy area associated with false promises.

“If we have a better president that is well educated we can see changes come because most of our [previous] presidents don’t value education” Female 20-35, Bombali district, rural

“When they are on radio and TV they always say we will have free education, they are lying to us” Teenage mother, Bombali, rural

Many felt that the system has become corrupted by money and by sexual exploitation of female students. Grades can be bought, for money or for sex, and it was recognised that this would have a ripple effect across wider society such that the most qualified candidates are not eligible for public positions.

“[Teachers] are mostly given two hundred and fifty [thousand] Leones per paper as payment. And many students can’t even spell a simple word or express themselves properly. The education system is a total mess in this country right now”. Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural.

“Even if I study very hard, it will be a waste of time, once I don’t have money to pay and bribe my teacher for me to pass, I will not pass.” Male, 15-19, Western Area Urban

Sexual abuse of women and girls in schools by teachers is seen as widespread and leads to young women dropping out. This is particularly ironic given that school is seen as a sanctuary away from early sexual relationships, teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

“There is sexual harassment; a teacher might propose love to you, if you don’t accept he will give you a poor grade. Even if you give him money he will give a poor grade. We have such teachers.”

A key complaint was the creation of SS4 – the extra year introduced between school and higher education. Teachers do not turn up, and it is felt that the only way to pass is to get more private tuition, making graduation an even more challenging prospect.

The complaints of young people in the study is validated by data collected by Restless Development volunteers as part of the UK Department for International Development’s SABI project. The project uses community-led data collection and presentation as a means to improve accountability and service delivery in Sierra Leone. SABI data shows that two thirds (64%) of students don’t have a chair and desk; over half (55%) admit having to pay for assignments and a fifth (21%) admit to paying for a pass mark⁶. Given that paying to gain advantage in schools is a crime, it is fair to presume this data underestimates the scale of the problem.

In education, unlike in some of the other areas discussed, the young people in the study have clear policy demands. In particular, they demand the abolition of SS4 and want to see free education for all.

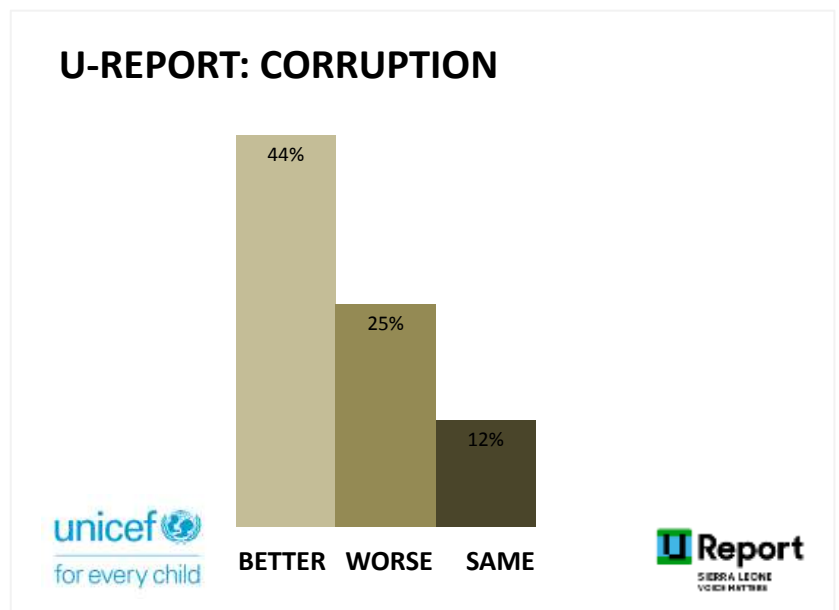
CORRUPTION

On corruption, the qualitative research paints a picture of Sierra Leonean youth as having mixed views. Some seem sceptical that corruption will ever improve and describe it as the problem without end which has blighted Sierra Leone ‘since the days of our forefathers’. Most see Sierra Leone as exceptionally blighted by corruption. Some frame it as a matter of contempt for your fellow countrymen, while others are more sympathetic, arguing that people take from others because they are desperate.

“[It’s about] loyalty to the nation”. Female, 15-19, Bo district, rural

Corruption is seen to stem from the very top of society and continue all the way down. The most cited example is around the money and support promised to Ebola survivors, and which is not seen to have materialised. Those who are also pessimistic about the economy and the cost of living naturally see a direct link to corruption, and hence imagine that the situation will worsen.

“I believe corruption will become worse. It is visible now, everyday prices of things are going up... even the elders are all corrupt all the government ministries and departments are all corrupt.” Young people living with disabilities, Bo district, rural



UNICEF’s U-Report SMS Poll: Nov 28th 2017, 7,772 responders out of 65,761 polled

⁶ DFID, SABI – Education data <http://sabi-sl.org/community-data/data-for-education/> Accessed on 6th December 2017

Others were slightly more optimistic that a new leader might bring some improvement on corruption. In terms of solutions, young people tended to feel powerless that there was much they can do themselves, but felt that improvement would only come if public sector workers are paid a good wage to begin with, and fines for people found asking for bribes are more punitive.

Some young people were philosophical about corruption and linked it to income disparity in workplaces.

“We have legalised corruption. I am working in an office that pays me fifty thousand ... I am unable to do anything with that money ... they are paying other people big money”. Male, 20-35, Bo district, rural

UNICEF’s U-Report data presents a broadly more optimistic picture than the qualitative research might suggest. Just less than half (44%) of U-Reporters who responded thought things would get better on corruption, while 25% said things would get worse, and 12% say things will stay the same. This is more pessimistic than U-Reporters’ projections on education or employment.

HEALTH

On health, as with education, many young people are deeply pessimistic and expect that the health system will remain poor or get worse. The causes are seen to be a shortage of high quality medication, the corruption of healthcare workers and the un-met promises of free healthcare (to pregnant or lactating women, children under five and Ebola survivors). One participant noted ruefully ‘free health, free death’.

“If your family member fall sick and u take him to the hospital the doctors or nurses will not touch him if there is no money” Young person living with a disability, Bo district, rural

“The free health care is a big lie because since I have being going to hospital I have never benefit from it” Young person living with a disability, Bo district, rural

“Even the pregnant women and lactating mothers that are to enjoy the facility are not benefiting out of the service as there are no medicines available to give out to them”. Male 20-35, Bo district, rural

Young people have largely only had unpleasant experiences in hospitals with a lack of doctors, or doctors being absent and receiving poor treatment from nurses. Both professions are widely seen as stealing medicines and selling them on for profit.

“The Nurses were also corrupt because the keep the good drugs and take them home and sell them” Female, 20 – 35, Bombali district, rural

CONCLUSION

What is the state of the youth as we head into the 2018 election?

This research reveals Sierra Leonean young people to be a complex and far from homogenous group. However, there are some unifying characteristics: Sierra Leonean young people are characterised by a community mindedness, they tend to justify their ambitions with reference to the greater good, be it the betterment of their community or in service to God. Personal success here generally looks like being able to provide for yourself, but critically to pull others up around you.

When we ask young people we hear that they are broadly optimistic about their own lives and they believe it is possible to have a good life in their community. They can all point to people they know who have had “a good life”.

However there are some interesting tensions and contradictions raised in this report, which highlight the complexities of life in Sierra Leone. The young people we spoke to were positive and negative, excited and frustrated, powerful and powerless. Understanding this dichotomy is crucial. We see that:

Young people strongly believe they will be able to cast their ballot without interference.... but they are worried about discussing their politics in public

- Young people express fear and are inhibited to talk about politics in the run up to the election but strongly believe they will be able to cast their ballot free from interference.
- Despite their electoral majority, young people lack influence in politics, and some feel that the parties have acted to side-line youth voices in the run up to 2018.
- Young Sierra Leoneans talk of violence pre-election as widespread and frightening, but they also say that violence is a thing of the past in Sierra Leone.
- They are hopeful and excited about the election, but most believe that little will change over the next few years on the most important issues like health and education.
- There are signs that young people are approaching the election with a keen sense of responsibility, and certainly a sense of duty to the country.
- Some young voters explicitly talk about deliberating over their choice at the ballot and reject the actions of older relatives who cast their vote in exchange for money or out of habit.

Young people see education as the key to success... but feel the education system is failing them

- They believe that education is the road to success but have experienced grave abuses of power within the system.
- Young people hope that change will come around education – but don’t fully trust the pledges politicians make on free education.

Young people are pessimistic about corruption when talking in a group... but they are more optimistic when asked to speak from an individual perspective

- In focus groups, young people tend towards pessimism when thinking about Sierra Leone’s future especially on corruption – but perhaps in private they are more optimistic, as suggested by U-Report responses.

Young people feel hard work and focus will bring money and reward.... but aren't in control of escalating prices and inflation

- Young people are vaguely optimistic about the economy, think that hard work and 'focus' will see them through and will be the key to improving Sierra Leone's fortunes. At the same time, they are experiencing escalating price rises and inflation, and few expect to see this trend reversed any time soon.
- Young Sierra Leoneans know the challenges that lie ahead in their lives, but chastise themselves severely for failure, often attributing lack of personal success to their own weakness, which leaves a mental and emotional toil.

Despite the sometimes contradictory views of young people, there is a lot here to be encouraged by; chief among them is the rejection of violence as a legitimate means of influencing the outcome of the election and the way that young people are approaching their democratic duty.

In 2018, Restless Development will continue to work with young people so that they can lead in solving the challenges we've highlighted in this report. We will continue to drive accountability by holding service providers to account through youth-led data collection and reporting. We will continue to empower women and young men through our business and livelihoods projects that aim to help young people secure a decent living. We will continue to safeguard the physical health of young people including our sexual and reproductive health and rights work, and our work on preventing the spread of malaria.

We don't believe that young people are a problem waiting to be fixed. We don't believe that young people are the future. We believe that young people are the now, the present, the problem solvers, and our leaders.